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ABSTRACT

The ERIC digest examines the paradox posed to social studies educators by the new wave of immigrants and increasing ethnic diversity: namely, how do educators depict accurately and fairly the rich ethnic diversity of the United States and also teach core values of a common American heritage? With the underlying theme being the promotion of both unity and diversity, the digest discusses four aspects of the problem: (1) the meaning of education about ethnic diversity in the United States, which concentrates on core values; (2) reasons for its importance, which include enhancing students' self-concepts; (3) the place of ethnic diversity in the curriculum, which should permeate all levels; and (4) procedures for teaching about ethnic diversity in the United States, which suggest seven approaches, including unbiased examination, comparisons, positive interpersonal relationships, community resources, reading programs, and value reinforcement. A bibliography is included. (TRS)

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TEACHING ABOUT ETHNIC DIVERSITY
ERIC DIGEST NO. 32

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TEACHING ABOUT ETHNIC DIVERSITY

by Cheryl Bernstein Cohen

Immigration and ethnic diversity are central characteristics of the American experience. The United States has accepted more immigrants, from more places around the world, than any other nation. During the twentieth century, the ethnic mixture of the United States has become increasingly varied, a trend that continues today with waves of "new immigration" from Asia and Latin America.

Immigration and ethnic diversity have posed a paradox to American educators in the social studies, which is connoted in the national motto, *E Pluribus Unum.* There is persistent tension between *Pluribus* and *Unum*, but educators in a free society should promote both unity and diversity. How do educators depict accurately and fairly the rich ethnic diversity of the United States and also teach core values of a common American heritage? This ERIC Digest examines (1) the meaning of education about ethnic diversity in the United States, (2) reasons for its importance, (3) the place of ethnic diversity in the curriculum, and (4) procedures for teaching about ethnic diversity in the United States.

What is education about ethnic diversity in a free society?

Education about ethnic diversity treats cultural pluralism within a nation-state by examining variable traits of different groups (religious, linguistic, culinary, artistic, etc.) which distinguish one group from another. A major tenet of education about ethnic diversity in a free society is acceptance of cultural pluralism as a national strength rather than an obstacle to be overcome. Individuals of various minority groups may maintain their ethnic identities while sharing a common culture with Americans from many different ethnic backgrounds.

In a free society, education in the social studies should build consensus on core civic values, such as the rule of law, representative and limited government, and civil liberties, including toleration of and respect for the rights of individuals and ethnic minority groups. These core civic values are important to all Americans, regardless of ethnic differences, and serve to unify various groups in the United States. Historian John Higham uses the term "pluralistic integration" to describe his rationale for blending unity with diversity in the education of Americans. He says that pluralistic integration "will uphold the validity of a common culture to which all individuals have access while sustaining the efforts of minorities to preserve and enhance their own integrity. . . . Both integration and ethnic cohesion are recognized as worthy goals, which different individuals will accept in different degrees" (1984, 244). Educators who recognize and respect their students' ethnic identities should also prepare them to assume common obligations and responsibilities of citizenship which involve shared civic values embodied in basic documents of the American heritage such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. Although students and teachers may participate variously within different microcultures, they also come together within the American mainstream culture, especially the civic culture (Banks, 1981, 19).

Why is education about ethnic diversity important?

Studies by Glock and others (Martin, 1985) have shown that the more children understand about stereotyping the less negativism they will have toward other groups. By exposing students to knowledge about ethnic diversity and the contributions of various groups to our developing American civilization, educators in the social studies may change negative ethnic group stereotypes, reduce intolerance, and enhance cooperation for the common good.

An important core value in the American civic culture is protection of minority group rights, including the rights of ethnic minorities. Various studies have indicated that lessons about civil liberties issues and the constitutional rights of individuals can foster civic tolerance and acceptance of minority rights. By teaching all students about the constitutional rights and liberties of individuals of various ethnic identities, educators in the social studies can promote support for the American ideal of majority rule with protection of minority rights (Patrick, 1980, 37).

Education about achievements of Americans of various ethnic groups can enhance the self-concepts of students who identify with these groups. When students feel that their ethnic identity is valued, they begin to view themselves as active and confident participants in a free society. They sense a purpose in developing civic competencies, realizing that perhaps their participation in public affairs may make a difference. Thus, education about the value of ethnic diversity in the American society can foster a sense of political efficacy among students of various ethnic backgrounds.

Where does ethnic diversity belong in the curriculum?

Education about ethnic diversity should permeate the social studies curriculum in every grade of elementary and secondary schools. Core subjects of the social studies, such as history, geography, government, and civics, should include lessons on ethnic diversity in the United States and elsewhere. There is no need to create special courses on ethnic diversity, because this subject matter belongs within the standard courses of the social studies curriculum. Indeed, a course in American history cannot be presented accurately without ample treatment of immigration and the consequent ethnic diversity of the United States. Likewise, a valid course in government must include content about civic responsibilities, rights, and liberties of ethnic minorities and constitutional issues about application of these values in specific situations.

The National Council for the Social Studies has charged educators with "the responsibility of recognizing ethnic diversity as a basis for societal cohesiveness and survival" (1976, 9). NCSS curriculum guidelines stress that the total school environment should reflect commitment to education about ethnic diversity, including pervasive treatment of this subject matter in standard courses; unbiased curriculum materials; and teachers who are educated to understand and appreciate cultural pluralism.

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What are effective procedures in teaching about ethnic diversity?

1. Enrich courses in the social studies by including multiple perspectives on American culture and history, reflecting various viewpoints of different groups of Americans. Unbiased examination of alternative interpretations of events in history and contemporary society can help students to escape ethnic encapsulation or ethnocentrism.

2. Use comparisons in describing and analyzing traditions, events, and institutions to help students know and appreciate similarities and differences among various ethnic groups. Through comparative studies, students learn to accept and respect different ways of being human. They also learn that members of all ethnic groups have common characteristics and needs. Knowledge of characteristics and needs that all humans share can foster a sense of community among individuals of diverse ethnic identities.

3. Communicate to students of various ethnic identities that they are valued members of the school community. Teachers should also accept both similarities and differences of individuals with the same ethnic identity and value the worth of the individual. Students are likely to learn more from classroom instruction when they feel accepted and valued by their teachers and peers.

4. Provide opportunities for students to have positive interpersonal relations with individuals of various ethnic groups. Emphasize learning through group activities in the classroom and the community in areas with diverse populations. In homogeneous communities, the teacher will need to bring visitors of various ethnic backgrounds into the school to interact with students.

5. Reach beyond the textbook to use community resources on ethnic diversity. By asking for cooperation from students, parents, and the local community, teachers can develop numerous educational resources. Oral and local histories, family records, and community studies can be useful. Field trips to museums, outdoor markets, and festivals can complement classroom activities.

6. Strive to expand students' knowledge of ethnic groups in American history and contemporary society through reading programs that expose them to books of fiction, biography, and history and to magazine and newspaper articles about ethnic diversity. Teachers should read extensively too, because effective teaching about ethnic diversity, or anything else, is based on knowledge. Teachers cannot teach what they do not know.

7. Stress values of ethnic diversity and national unity. Students of various backgrounds need to know and appreciate attitudes, institutions, and traditions they share as Americans. Likewise, they need to know and appreciate the splendid diversity that characterizes the United States and has made it a haven for seekers of freedom from around the world. Thus, teaching about ethnic diversity in the United States should involve lessons on core values that foster unity among Americans of various backgrounds and ethnic identities.

References and ERIC Resources

Following is a bibliography of resources, including references in this Digest. Those entries followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copy from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For price information, write EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304.

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